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ARTICLE

The Myths that Blind: The Role of Beliefs in School Change

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Schools in the US continue to fail our most marginalized children. We know children of color, poor children and English language learners often receive the smallest pieces of the educational pie. One does not have to look far to see that reality. Forty-five percent of Latino children did not graduate in 2002 (Olson, 2006). Children of color continue to lag behind in college attendance (Hallinan, 2001), NAEP test scores (Madeus & Clarke, 2001) and access to demanding courses (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Regardless of the breadth of these issues, when we talk about the achievement gap, we tend to focus on the technical. Politicians argue for new computers, principals ask for more funding, teachers request instructional aides or updated materials. Conversations about school improvement often hinge on these more tangible changes. While such technical considerations are surely part of the equation, I would argue that fundamentally, addressing the achievement gap means unearthing the norms that allow this gap to continue.

While many factors complicate the improvement of urban schools, change is often hampered by perceptions and beliefs. Myths about urban schools, “at-risk” students and families in poverty impact how schools function. While many of these beliefs remain unspoken and unchallenged, they form the bedrock on which we build educational policies and practice. Such beliefs can be considered a form of grammar: those taken-for-granted, unconscious structures that form the basis of the “way things are” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Changes – the likes of which would be required to address the achievement gap – often require a retooling of belief systems. It is not easy to change perceptions.

Challenges to normative beliefs tend to create the most resistance (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). Thus, equity-minded reformers, especially those who wish to redistribute resources or challenge the status quo, must struggle with both the technical aspects of closing the achievement gap and the normative beliefs of stakeholders involved at all levels. Using Oakes’ framework to understand the dimensions of school change (1992; 1998), this essay will outline perceptual factors that equity-minded change agents face as they argue for equal opportunities for all. I will argue that before we can consider new methods and new curricula, we need to consider our beliefs about the children we teach and how those understandings shape the educational realities of our students. I will argue that without attention to the normative beliefs that impede closing the achievement gap, urban schools will continue to be constrained by inequity.

A Framework for Considering Change

Whether reforms are embraced or rebuffed rests upon the will and perceived needs of a wide array of school, district and community constituents. We can organize these competing factors in terms of three conceptual components. Oakes (1992) suggests three dimensions– the political, technical, and normative – which impact school change. Oakes conceives of the political perspective to include the power relationships between actors, both within schools and from external constituencies. Schools mirror the tensions and hierarchies of the greater community. The push and pull occurring in communities over resources, allocation and deservedness is replicated in schools. Teachers, parents, administrators and community members engage in political posturing in order to secure advantages for themselves and their children. Closing the achievement gap often requires redistributing resources. This reallocating of material, staffing and programs should not be seen as a one dimensional movement of “things” rearranged without consequence. Instead, it is key to acknowledge that these resources are desirable - be they teachers, materials, or services - and that redistribution from the haves to the have

nots is often fraught with tension.

Technical changes involve revisions to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and school organization (Oakes, 1992). Technical concerns involve how schools are organized and how teaching occurs. Examples of technical changes may include the addition of a standardized test or the adoption of new textbooks. These changes, while critical, are but one piece of the reform package.

Lastly, Oakes' notion of the normative perspective helps us understand that values and beliefs undergird policymaking and implementation. While often unspoken, these attitudes and ideologies can be a source of potential conflict for equity-minded reformers. Normative beliefs include perceptions about ability, how difference is treated, and who is considered educable. These beliefs form the foundation for subsequent reform initiatives. For example, if a school wants to institute an inclusion model for their children in special education, they must tackle change on two fronts. Technical concerns require attention to the logistical and personnel issues required for an inclusion model. But additionally, and in many ways more importantly, teachers and administrators should address the normative concerns inclusion may bring up. Do teachers believe inclusion is fair to all children? Do they believe it will harm "regular ed" children? Do they believe educating children with special needs is their job?

Additionally, Oakes provides the useful construct of third order changes (1998). While change is a constant in schools, it tends to be focused on policies, procedures and programs. Third order changes are defined as "fundamental changes which seek to reform core normative beliefs about race, class, intelligence and educability held by educators and others involved with our schools" (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 968). Third order changes pose significant challenges for equity-minded reformers; they require reconceptualizing beliefs about race, merit and fairness. Oakes (1998) cautions that not all change is equal. Equity-minded change - change that seeks to achieve equality of opportunity for all students - is particularly precarious because it pushes the boundaries of traditionally held views.

The Role of Teacher Beliefs

Teacher beliefs form the foundation of the child/educator relationship. The expectations teachers have, their beliefs about the educability of children and their personal racism, overt or covert, impact their interactions with students. Unfortunately, an array of research on teacher beliefs provides us with two doses of bad news. First, teachers – in particular White teachers – often have negative beliefs about children of color. Secondly, these beliefs matter. School practices and policies *are shaped by* the conceptions teachers and administrations have about the children in their care. If these stakeholders harbor limiting beliefs, these beliefs will be reflected in the programs and policies they create. Perceptions do not simply exist as abstract concepts; they are functionally consequential to the operation of schools.

The vast majority of teachers are White, thus when I talk of teacher beliefs, it is primarily White teachers' beliefs. While diversity within the student population continues to grow, the opposite is true among teachers. The teaching pool is becoming more homogenous, as the number of teachers of color decreases (Nieto, 2000). Overall, Whites make up 90% of the teaching force in the United States (Sleeter, 1998). While being White clearly does not preclude teachers from effectively educating children of color, an expansive body of literature argues that many White teachers often are not interested in teaching children of color, may hold negative beliefs of children of color and if they are teaching in diverse schools, do not feel prepared to do so well. A study by Van Hook (2002) observed that White teacher candidates prefer not to teach in culturally diverse schools. Pre-service teachers favor working with students who are like them and come from similar communities (Zimpher, 1989, in Zeichner, 1996). An ATE study found that only 9% of teachers preferred to teach in multicultural

contexts, while most preferred to teach in the suburbs or small towns in traditional schools (Association of Teacher Education, 1991). Research by Larke (1990) found that four-fifths of her respondents preferred to not work with students from diverse backgrounds. Overall, there remains a “massive reluctance” on the part of new teachers to work in urban schools (Zeichner, 1996, p.135).

Research also shows that White pre-service teachers often bring with them negative views of children of color (Schultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1996). In some cases, underachievement on the part of children of color has become the default expectation in schools. Many teachers find the underachievement of children of color normal or expected (Sleeter, 1995). Because low achievement is the norm, questioning why many children of color fail in schools often does not seem necessary. Aaronsohn, Carter and Howell (1995) found that teacher education students believed minority students were “wise guys,” “delinquents” and “dirtier.” The majority of their respondents also believed inner-city parents do not care about their children’s education.

Misguided perceptions about intelligence continue to act as a sorting mechanism in schools. Scientific claims based on everything from cranium size to IQ testing have provided “evidence” as to how people of color were intellectually inferior (Menchaca, 1997). While such claims are largely out of favor, recent research still attempts to correlate race with intelligence (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). I wonder how these beliefs linger in our collective memory. Schools may not segregate entire classrooms by race for instruction formally, but in many ways we can see how this perception plays out. Does this “biological basis” of intelligence help explain the over representation of White students in gifted tracks? Or African American children in special education? Returning to Tyack and Tobin’s notion of “grammar” again, we can see how beliefs - like grammar – are enduring and unconscious. A constellation of negative beliefs regarding worthiness, aptitude, merit, and effort coalesce to create normative systems that shape children’s day to day lives in schools. While decision makers may not consciously sort children using such antiquated beliefs, the remnants of this ideology remain.

Blame Shifting Myths

Myths are stories that explain traditional beliefs. A form of fiction, they are often filled with half truths. Several myths aid in the maintenance of the educational status quo. They include the myth of cultural deprivation, the myth of meritocracy and the myth of colorblindness. Together, these act as “blame shifting” myths. They share common threads in that responsibility for the achievement gap is attributed to a) factors beyond the control of administrators and teachers or b) factors that are race neutral. Instead of forcing an examination of bias and privilege, these myths allow the “tellers” to shift blame to children, their families and their communities.

The myth of cultural deprivation maintains that children of color grow up in communities which are steeped in negative attitudes and devoid of aspirations for school success (Hallinan, 2001). This cultural deficit model places blame on families as a source of pathology (Pearl, 1997) and maintains that students of color are raised in families that are “disorganized, noncompetitive and anti-intellectual” (Oakes, 1986, p.66). The myth includes the notion that families of color do not value education and are not interested in the educational advancement of their children (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). A 1991 survey found new teachers indicating that children’s academic problems stemmed not from issues in the classroom, but as consequences of their home lives (Gomez, 1993). All too frequently, we can hear this myth actualized in refrains of “these parents just don’t care” and “education isn’t important to these people.” This myth is steeped in Eurocentrism. White child rearing practices and approaches to education become the default manner of socializing children, with non-European traditions being marginalized as deficient. Maintaining this myth serves an important purpose in schools: by locating families and communities as the source of underachievement, schools can deflect their role in

children's low performance.

White teachers often support notions of meritocracy (Rist, 1970), believing that if children of color just work harder, they too could be successful. The myth of meritocracy states that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in life and in school, providing they work hard and apply themselves. This myth supports the notion that schools are neutral places, where structural inequities do not exist and fairness is the name of the game. Teachers who support the notion of meritocracy set up a worthy/unworthy dichotomy. Because all students have equal chances to excel, students who do succeed within the system are worthy of the benefits they receive. Children who fail do so of their own accord, not because of bias in the system. The myth of meritocracy is also colorblind. Merit stresses individual student efforts while minimizing race and language based factors. As a consequence, this myth ignores inequalities associated with one's gender, race, class and age (Oakes, 2002). By supporting this myth, schools can maintain an illusion of race-neutrality. Thus, when children of color are placed in low-value programs and are in the least desirable tracks, schools can place the blame on students' own motivation, effort or intelligence, rather than unequal educational opportunities (Oakes, 1986).

Colorblindness presents a special dilemma. Many people aspire to colorblindness, believing if they acknowledge race, they are somehow racist. In denying they see race, Whites can distance themselves from being considered racists. Colorblindness also allows Whites to seem "innocent" or "neutral" since they claim not to consider race a current issue (Bell, 2002). Pre-service teachers purport to treat all children alike (Rist, 1970), claiming they do not notice – or act on – differences in the classroom. While many authors highlight the shortsightedness of colorblind rhetoric in education (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Pollock, 2004) helping White pre-service teachers see how colorblindness *contributes* to inequality continues to be a challenge. Cautions Delpit: "If one does not see color, one does not really see children" (1995, p. 177). Delpit argues that de-racing children wounds their self-concept and renders them invisible. When teachers refuse to see children as racialized beings, they send a message to children that their race is something best *not* noticed. Moreover, Delpit warns that colorblindness, as it is actualized in the curriculum, exacerbates poor performance by students of color. They are unable to find representations of "the intellectual achievements of people who look like themselves. Were that not the case, these children would not talk about doing well in school as 'acting White'" (1995, p. 177). This invisibility contributes to a variety of consequences, including diminished self-worth and a sense that the child is not "worthy of notice" (p. 177). Through the myth of colorblindness, we can see the belief-practice cycle unfold. While White teachers may wish to seem "equitable" in the classroom by ignoring race, they are in fact achieving the exact opposite. Schofield (1997) cautions that while colorblindness pretends to minimize conflict, it actually makes race taboo and stunts the ability to solve race-based conflicts. The myth that we live in a colorblind world, one that treats all children equally and is devoid of bias is disingenuous. When teachers operationalize colorblindness in classrooms, however well-intended, the consequences are damaging. Schools face real problems, with real roots in inequitable practices. By removing race from the conversation, by making race a non-issue, we remove any race, class, and language based remedies that might be necessary.

The Impact:

Beliefs matter. Yes, most teachers will argue that they believe "all children can learn." Clearly, there are competent, supportive, race-conscious teachers who believe in the potential, capabilities and humanity of all their charges. But when the achievement gap continues to exist, this phrase seems more a slogan than a reality. It is critical to reflect on how normative assumptions impact policy and practice. Rather than being neutral and unbiased, schools are shaped by long-held, durable belief systems about the children they educate. Perceptions and myths contribute to inaccurate pictures of

children of color. Because these myths often go unexamined, they continue to inform our educational practice, tainting these practices with low expectations and acceptance of failure.

Returning again to Oakes' frameworks, we are reminded that attention to beliefs ought to work in tandem with attention to logistics and political pressures. Normative beliefs influence the relationships between teachers and students, schools and families, and communities and the students in their care. As normative beliefs help shape technical and political change, the foundation for lasting improvement begins here. A focus on third order changes and on asking educational stakeholders to reconsider how they view children of color is an important start. In addressing the host of hurdles facing urban schools, addressing normative beliefs is a crucial first step.

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